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ABSTRACT

Repetition in vocal characterizations and deviant listening perceptions are two major weaknesses of American acting. That is, voices and diction usually sound the same in everything the actors do, but no one perceives it. One reason listening is so deficient is because of the uninformed or incorrect concepts of those who practice or teach acting. Another shortcoming of American acting is the lack of methodology available for directing or acting in foreign plays in English translation. These shortcomings pertain not only to the academic and professional worlds and those in-between, but to the critical realm as well, such as poorly qualified drama critics. The kind of acting performances that should occur result from good character study. One way performers can avoid repetition and straight acting is to read their lines into a cassette: once as they speak normally, the second time as the unique character of the script. Each playback should sound different. Another approach is for performers to receive training in portraying characters with dialects and/or foreign accents. When performers read a part calling for an accent or dialect and handle it deftly, it helps them not only to get inside the character, but also to seem different. Repetition and sameness should not be treated as being normal and proper, instead they should be viewed as aberrant and corrected. (HOD)

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HOW DEVIANT LISTENING PERCEPTIONS CAN IMPROVE THE PRACTICE AND TEACHING OF ACTING

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If I were to pinpoint one major weakness of American acting, it would be -- REPETITION. This applies both to training and practice of acting, amateur and professional. Which leads me to the rationale for using the words - deviant listening perceptions - in the title of this paper. It is because sameness is treated as being normal and proper, when instead it should be viewed as aberrant and corrected.

A personal anecdote will help elucidate this more vividly. Once long ago I was casting a serious dramatic play with professional actors/actresses. An actor, trying out for the leading male role, read several pages of the script. I stopped him and remarked he read well, but he was speaking in his natural voice and diction. I said I would now like to hear him read as the character of the play. His polite response was he had read that way because "that's what most directors want."

Let us turn back the pages of time, momentarily, to when I was an undergraduate studying acting. The methodology was to learn by doing, which meant acting in scenes largely from full-length plays. These were memorized and performed on a small, bare platform in class. Our voices and diction usually sounded the same in everything we did, but no one perceived it, students or professors, or was the subject ever mentioned.

Why was our listening so deficient? Because our concepts of what acting should be were uninformed or incorrect.

To comprehend this postulate better, let's step inside the playwright's domain for a moment. When a dramatist writes a script, he/she hears the characters speak in his/her mind's ear. And these personalities, assuming the writer is not a hack and is creating an original set of characters, sound different - could you hear them speak - from any ever created on a stage before. Therefore, is it possible, is it logical, for the character of a script and the performer to have the identical speech rhythms, diction, or/and voice coloring?

In our undergraduate acting classes we performed in foreign as well as American plays. And whether we did Chekhov or Strindberg or George Kelly or Noel Coward or John Millington Synge, it all sounded American. There wasn't a suggestion that we learn to speak with a British accent in Coward's Private Lives, or try to acquire an Irish brogue in Synge's one-act "Riders to the Sea." Again, no one perceived or commented on these incongruities.

Has the situation changed these many years? Let's take a look at what's happening in academia. About a year ago I chanced to hear a readers theater group of college professors. One of them, in giving the rationale for its existence, tossed out George Bernard Shaw's famous quip, "He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches." Laying aside that contentious remark, which can be rebutted, the troupe began its presentation by reading a highly compelling, sensitive, first person account of the atomic devastation of Hiroshima in fluent English translation. To a listener the inhabitants of that community might have been American rather than Japanese. This was followed by readings of short stories

by a famous Italian author, but the foreign savoriness was in short supply.

Are conditions any different out there in the professional theater? During the past year, I saw several Off Broadway productions of foreign plays. Two were by Ibsen: An Enemy of the People, and Brand, which is the name of the protagonist, and a third The Waltz of the Toreadors by Jean Anouilh. Each of these lacked the authentic flavor of the country, which was to be expected. Why? Because there is no methodology available for directing or acting in foreign plays in English translation. Consequently, what we are hearing is incorrect largely or, in musical terms, dissonant.

Last fall I inquired at the Billy Rose Theatre Collection of the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center about material apropos interpreting foreign plays. The librarian informed me he didn't know of any and referred me to a batch of reference books. There was nothing in them on the subject. The topic was addressed, however, for the first time probably in the history of the theater last November at the annual convention of the Speech Communication Association in a paper I delivered, "Strategies for Directing Foreign Plays in English Translation."

At this juncture you may wonder, as I have, why the professors and professionals have been asleep so long in this respect. There is a god in some theater circles named Stanislavski and someone so worshipful may say, "He certainly must have said something about it."

Well, let's look at the record as a once famous politician used to say. In 1964 the Tulane Drama Review devoted two editions to the subject of "Stanislavski in America." One of the articles, in Volume 9, Number 1, Fall 1964, "Director and Actor at Work," is an essay

composed of notes Stanislavski made regarding his conception and portrayal of the character Cavaliere Rippafratta in the eighteenth century farce, The Mistress of the Inn, by Carlo Goldoni, a play rarely performed incidentally in this country. In the course of his warm, engaging, disingenuous remarks Stanislavski blithely overlooks mentioning that, since this is a play in foreign translation, the creation of the character should be approached disparately than if he were Russian.

The shortcomings I have pointed out in acting, a salient part of which involve listening, pertain not only to the academic and professional worlds and those in-between, but to the critical realm as well. A question I would like to introduce is: Do you know what the background or qualifications of your drama critics are?

In partial reply, due to time limitations, I would like to refer to the fall of 1953, when I was a new member of the Drama Desk, an organization of theater editors, reporters, critics, in New York City. One day I had a luncheon appointment with the chief drama critic of the New York Post at a posh restaurant in a hotel. His first words on meeting me were: "I'm a newspaperman by profession; I'm a creature of deadlines." And all through a most pleasant meal not a word was said about the theater.

Have things changed since 1953? Theatre Times, a publication of the Alliance of Resident Theatres in New York City, has a page one interview in its March 1986 edition with Frank Rich, chief drama critic of the New York Times. Preceding the dialogue is a capsule account of Rich's qualifications. As you listen, try to ferret out any training or experience he has had in theater.

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Mr. Rich joined the New York Times in April 1980 as culture critic and was named chief drama critic in September 1980. He formerly worked as a film and television critic for Time magazine. Prior to joining Time, Mr. Rich was a film critic for the New York Post and for New Times magazine. In 1972 and1973, he was co-founder, as well as a reporter and editor, of the Richmond (VA) Mercury. Born in Washington, DC in 1949, Mr. Rich graduated in 1971 from Harvard University with a degree in American history and literature. He was editorial chairman, chief film critic and theatre critic of the Harvard Crimson in 1970.

In sum, there are extremely few critics I have come across who could be labeled qualified. And while I've enjoyed the writing style of many, including Frank Rich, I have yet to find one whose critical analyses were satisfying.

One of the traditional misconceptions in the past, at least until about 35 years ago, was pigeonholing actors/actresses into types, like juvenile, ingenue, leading man, leading woman, character man, character woman, etc., as though people in real life all dovetailed into these categories. Designations like these, unfortunately, resulted in artificial sounding or seeming acting. Every acting role, whether the person is young, middle-aged or elderly of whatever kind, should be viewed as a character study. The greatest acting, from a pragmatic standpoint, results from this approach.

With that in mind, let us turn to some distinguished actors and acting performances. Laurence Olivier is generally regarded as our foremost thespian. In films he has done beginning, in my

judgment, with The Entertainer. Olivier has created diverse personages. He is no longer the good-looking young man of motion pictures like As You Like It or Wuthering Heights or Hamlet. One of his notable creations was shown for two days only in February 1966[1] in selected movie theaters. That was his portrayal of Othello. His acting was a startling revelation, especially to one who had seen black actors in the role, one being Paul Robeson. In preparing for the part, Olivier received vocal coaching. The result was that his voice and diction had a different texture and timbre, and sounded like that of a black man from a foreign culture. In fact, I thought the performance superior to those of the black actors I had and have since seen.

A recent film portrayal that I think merits the accolade masterpiece is that of Meryl Streep as Sophie in Sophie's Choice. She portrays a Polish refugee with a marked foreign accent, who came to this country after the Hitler holocaust, and not only does she sound distinctly different but, equally salient, credible. One believes she was born that character, she is not impersonating her. It is the calibre acting we need more of.

How many among you remember the unforgettable characterization of Laurette Taylor as The Mother in Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie? She seemed to envelop the character to such an extent one felt here was the definitive impersonation. And, with the passing of years, I would say it probably was. I did not realize how extremely difficult the role was until I had students attempt to act it. Laurette Taylor made it look so easy.

[1] I am indebted, for this precise information, to the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

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Finally, among this terse litany, I must include one more name: the highly dedicated, courageous Paul Muni, who was the most distinctive actor we have had in Hollywood films. In part it was due to his having a better understanding of what acting should be than any other Hollywood star, and practicing it. The word repetition could never be applied to him. How remarkably different, for example, were his delineations of Louis Pasteur, the Chinese Wang Lung, and the Mexican Juarez.

The kinds of acting performances I have pointed to as being preeminent should occur more frequently. But for that to happen it is germane in part for teachers of acting and theater directors to be tuned into repetition and straight acting and, if it occurs, to point it out. (This pertains also to improvisatory acting). The aim should be for each impersonation to sound original as well as true to the author's intent. Should the character of the script sound just like the performer it is comparable to a musician's playing the wrong notes of music and sounding dissonant. In that case the actor/actress, student or professional, needs to be alerted to it, and be directed or guided to do it differently.

One strategy is for a performer to read his/her lines into a cassette: once as he/she speaks normally; the second time as the unique character of the script. Each playback, needless to say, should sound <u>different</u>. (An additional aid may be for a sketch or picture to be limned of the character in the text indicating dissimilar features - face, hair, nose, chin, etc. - from the player's).

Another approach, among others, is for actors/actresses to receive training in portraying characters with dialects or/and foreign accents.

The efficacy of this method was made apparent to me in a situation long ago in which an actor read from a script giving a straight reading. He sounded bland and uninteresting. Then he read a different role essaying an accent. Magically he flowered into and became another personality; appealing; absorbing. I have since observed similarly that when a performer reads a part calling for an accent or dialect, and handles it deftly it helps him/her not only get inside the character, but seem different.

Here there is a caveat. In a television production the past year, Hollywood star Richard Chamberlain essayed the role of Raoul Wallenberg, the heroic Swedish diplomat who saved the lives of many Jews in World War II. He employed a foreign intonation, ample to indicate he wasn't or, didn't sound, American, which imparted a novel flavor and evoked a different charisma to his playing. Basically, however, it was the same Chamberlain voice we've heard before, which was a distinct indication he wasn't creating a dissimilar character. To have given an illusion of being a character different from himself, Chamberlain's face and hair styling would have had to be noticeably altered; his physical shape and walk and gestures would have had to be perceptibly changed as well.

I have said for a long time that I don't believe we have too many professional actors; we have too few adequately and superbly trained ones. In short, there is always room at the top. To help achieve that goal, some of the concepts or understandings of instructors in schools, colleges and conservatories need to be revised as well as those of drama directors in theater, films, and TV. It would also be salutary - though I'm doubtful - if we had qualified drama critics, who had exceptional insights and perceptions, and were blessed with an acute sense of listening.

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